"MacArt": Revolution on a Desktop 1984-1990

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Throughout the 1970's and much of the 1980's most artists had little use for the computer. The arcane language of programming and the results on a computer screen bore little apparent relationship to the work created by camera's lens or the painter's brush. This would change in 1984 with the development, marketing, and release of the Macintosh computer whose conception was heavily influenced by the local San Francisco Bay Area political and social events. These seminal events included the Free Speech Movement and People's Park demonstrations in Berkeley, and the protests against the Stanford Research Institute involvement with the military-industrial complex, the War in Vietnam as well as the rise of the counterculture, environmentalism, the women's movement and the use of appropriate technologies of the 60's and 70's which gave rise to the personal computer.

Nevertheless, it took a computer that was uniquely suited to artists before many would consider touching this technology for the first time. That computer was the Apple Macintosh, whose very DNA seems to speak (most literally) to artists whose main interests centered more on a critique of technology and its effects on society then in an exploration of the underlying technologies. A new crop of digital artists working between 1984 and 1990 had little connection to the earlier explorations in computer art but instead had a strong affinity to the goals and cultural ideals that would flower in the 60's and 70's.

These artists that were mostly working outside of the gallery system were supported by newly emerging alternative artist spaces (with independent publishers and curators) and would gravitate towards the Macintosh that was both engaging and transparent is such a way — as to allow them to leap beyond the technology (and the empty aestheticism of the previous generation of computational based computer graphics practitioners). It would allow them to introduce a new content charged body of work, that would both document and critically explore the rise of consumerism and consumer technology and its growing impact on society.

The founders of Apple Computer, Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak grew up in the San Francisco Bay Area and were influenced by the counter culture and the turbulent political times of that era. Steve Wozniak clearly states his reasons for wanting to develop a personal computer in an April 2008 interview with Andy Kessler for Tech-Ticker. "We were going to change the world with revolutionized education. And we always spoke of the word, revolution. All these big social changes we were going to bring where you could organize groups of people for even if it was an anti-war marches or whatever… All this talk that came from people like Jim Warner, he was a professor at Stanford, he spoke of the great social benefits to humanity you know, that we were now going to be equalized and the big companies wouldn't control our lives and I just felt that I was in the middle of one of the most important things in my life and I just want to help it happen. What I had to offer was my technical talents. I could build machines for other people who wanted to use machines to better humanity".

To make machines accessible to people who never used computers, the Macintosh was designed to be the first consumer computer to employ a graphical user interface. Susan Kare was the artist who created many of the original icons and interface elements for the Macintosh. Her knowledge of art history led her to model much of her work on traditional folk art, craft based mosaics, and needlepoint. The early Macintosh system-alerts were patterned on the original Bauhaus logo. She created some of the first popular "pixel based typefaces" such as Chicago, and San Francisco which was based on the Dada type designs of the 1920's and which also mimicked the cut and paste punk copy graphics of the 1970's. Susan Kare was also the creator of the infamous "Pirate Flag" raised by Macintosh development team above the Apple headquarters during the process of creating the innovative computer as a possible means of expressing their "other-ness".

Susan Kare, Apple Pirate Flag, 1983

The Macintosh was notable in that it included an easy to use programming environment, called HyperCard that could be used to create interactive applications, databases and games. It allowed non-programmers to easily realize a myriad of creative works. HyperCard was the creation of Bill Atkinson who also created MacPaint. Bill Atkinson was a programmer and an accomplished photographer who was influenced by Jeff Raskin and by ideas from the Architecture Machine group at MIT (a predecessor to the later MIT Media Lab) as demonstrated in a program called "DataLand" that allowed users to manipulate graphical objects in spatial arrangements. Bill Atkinson recognized the easy to use power and importance of HyperCard's ability to allow for creative control of what was often seen as a difficult to machine to mater. He called this program a "software erector set" At his insistence, HyperCard was to be included for free with the Macintosh. HyperCard was an immediate success as it allowed people to access the world of interactive programming by using the metaphor of a stack of recipe cards. HyperCard was one of the first popular implementations of hypertext and hypermedia and many of it's legacies include the creation of HTTP and JavaScript, countless "choose your own adventure games," interactive books, educational teaching aids, and multimedia CDROMS.

Lynn Hirshman Leeson a filmmaker, photographer, and performance artist was one of the first artists to make use of Apple's HyperCard. In her piece "Deep Contact" (1984-89) with programming assistance from Sara Roberts, she created an interactive touch sensing video laserdisc about the relationship of intimacy to technology. It was the first touch screen interactive sexual fantasy videodisc as well as incorporating a surveillance camera's live captured images that could appear superimposed on the screen. Lynn Hirshman Leeson's work "Deep Contact" blurred the line between the viewer and participant, expressed the empowerment of feminist sexuality, and exploded the traditional narrative formally controlled by a work's individual author.

Michael Tidmus an artist, graphic designer, and activist found out that he had AIDS in 1986 at a time when few people had access to reliable and unbiased information about the cause, transmission, prevention, and maintenance of the disease. The following year in 1987 (as soon as HyperCard was publicly available) he published the "AIDS Stack" using HyperCard to organize all of the currently known information about AIDS at that time. Since this work existed in digital form, he distributed it freely and widely, posting it on independent Bulletin Board Services, the WELL, Public Domain Archives, Usenet, and BITNET LISTSERV lists.

HyperCard would later be used to create many of the CD-ROM titles published by Voyager Company such as Laurie Anderson's Puppet Motel and the Resident's Freak Show. The original version of the popular interactive computer game, Myst was produced using HyperCard. Ward Cunningham, inventor of the WIKI built his first WIKI version on HyperCard. HyperCard was the first introduction to hypermedia for many people, which in a few years would be come commonplace with the advent of the World Wide Web. Chris Crawford would program a "simulation game" "Balance of Power" in 1985 on the Mac, where you are rewarded for conflict resolution

and NOT blowing up the world. Thomas Knoll created an experimental Macintosh program called Display in 1987, which evolves into Image Pro and eventually becomes Photoshop which sparked a revolution in digital photography.

In 1985, just a year after the visually based Macintosh debut, Apple released the Apple LaserWriter printer with a Raster Image Processor that included Adobe's PostScript interpreted page description language. This allowed for the printer to accurately render vector-based images and outline fonts at near typeset quality. This set off a revolution in modern typeface design and allowed another revolution known as Desktop Publishing. "What You See Is What You Get" Desktop Publishing put powerful tools in the hands of artists and designers.

Paul Rutkovsky an artist whose work explores consumerism and the environment had previously published books, began using the Macintosh in 1984 to produce DOO DAAA FLORIDA as a quarterly forum for artistic and literary expression within a thematic format. He says this about his work in an undated artist statement: "It has become increasingly important for me to use the computer and consumer level technology as playful tools connected to our culture. In our society where technology is viewed as a messiah and a quick fix to solve our social, political, and economic problems, I've put myself in this playground to responsibly take control and play…using technology to critically poke fun or satirize how it's used in our culture seems to humanize it, and allows us to view or critique it from a different perspective." Craig Hickman self published "Signal to Noise" using the Laserwriter Printer in 1988 and later went on to create the children's paint program, "Kid Pix." Craig Hickman states on his Pixelpoppin website: "The Macintosh was different. It was totally graphical so the visual possibilities were much greater. Most of all, the Mac seemed to have people with a consistent and enlightened vision behind it. The user interface was intelligent and beautiful."

Artists and designers who were drawn to the Macintosh early on included photographer Esther Parada a former
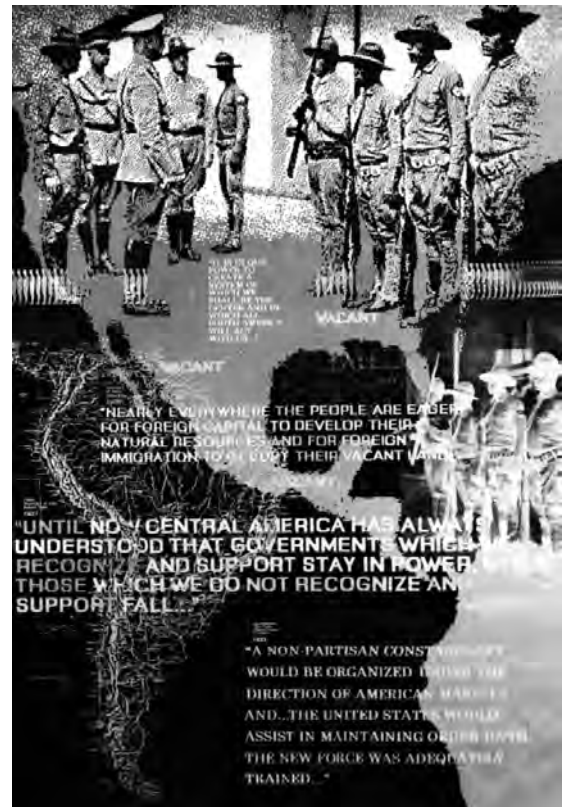
Esther Parada, The Monroe Doctrine:
Theme and Variations, 1987

Peace Corp volunteer in Bolivia who explored the interventionist role of America in relation to the rest of the world through the use of current events and historical patterns. Michael Saenz used MacPaint to Illustrate "Shatter," the first "computerized comic" in 1985. April Greiman a graphic designer was hugely influential with her "New Wave Graphics". Barbara Nessim brought a personal sense of humanity to works produced by the computer, a medium that was often regarded as cold and mechanical. Trici Venola brought a punk art aesthetic to her imagery and also created the first ever disc of "Clip Art" for the computer. These first generation of desktop computer artists spawned a revolution that is still being felt today, as they transformed a previously esoteric computational machine into an indispensible tool for creative and critical artistic production.